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THE TEACHING OF VIRGIL¹

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Virgil is not simply the poet of the *Aeneid*; he is also the poet of the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*. Virgil is not simply the poet of the Roman; he is that "poet whose verse has had the most power in the world, the poet who has been more than any other poet a part of the intellectual life, both of Europe and America, alike by length of sway and by the multitude of minds he has touched in all generations." But it is not the fascinating problem of the position of Virgil in literature which is to occupy our attention in this paper; it is the important problem of the position of Virgil in our Maine schools. We are to be concerned not with the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, but with the *Aeneid* and with the whole *Aeneid*. For it is a one-sided and narrowing interpretation which limits the study of Virgil to the first six books of his poem. Indeed, it is the primary intention of this paper to reclaim for high-school study the last six books of the *Aeneid* and to suggest for discussion some ways by which the *Aeneid* as a complete poem may be presented for study.

It is clear that the study of Virgil is, and ever will be, beset with peculiar difficulties for the student and the teacher in our schools. Many of the poet's qualities are often regarded as faults most repellent to youth. The *Aeneid* is weighted with erudition. Allusions from Roman history and literature, from Roman liturgy and theology, from Roman law and politics occur on every page. No other author read in school or college offers so much material concerning the spiritual and secular life of ancient Rome. Like Milton, Virgil is a learned poet, a scholar-poet. His poem has been well characterized as "a mere workshop to scholars who are not poets, mere dreamland to poets who love not study."² Our high-school boys and girls are for the most part neither poets nor scholars. They have passed out of

¹ Paper read before the Classical Teachers of Maine, October, 1908.

² Cf. the admirable introduction to Mr. T. C. Williams' translation of the *Aeneid*.

the realm of childhood where imagination is bred; and most of them have not become accustomed to the use of that maturer imaginative power of the mind which it is the peculiar function of poetry to develop. They have passed out of the stage of childish curiosity about everything to the transitional indifference of early youth; and only a very few show signs of the awakening of the intellectual curiosity of the scholar. That we classical teachers have the chance of presenting Virgil the poet just at this state of the student's development is at once both our glory and our responsibility.

Not only does the main interpretation of Virgil call for the best powers of the best teacher: in the case of the school and often of the college it is hard to secure a proper appreciation for the characters of the *Aeneid*. Virgil's hero has qualities of body, mind, and soul that are to the American boy or man indeed perplexing. The proneness of Aeneas to tears is, for a race that thinks it effeminate to express its emotions, a sign of sheer weakness. It is hard to bear with a man who is so supernaturally patient and enduring and good. On the other hand the adjective *pius* does not seem to go well with the lover and deserter of Dido. The difficulties involved in understanding aright the men and the women that Virgil drew are only increased seven fold when we reflect that the *Aeneid* as a whole deals not with the doings and thoughts and ideals of twentieth-century Americans, but with the aspirations of a race differing from ours in almost all of their social, intellectual, political, and religious institutions and attainments. The teacher of the *Aeneid* has no finer task than to point out why, for Virgil, Aeneas is the ideal man.

Another perplexing thing about the *Aeneid*, whether studied by the single books or as a whole, is its lack of unity resulting from the looseness of its structure as an epic. Each book is in large measure a separate study. The different books were indeed written at different times and finished with immense care; and, although they are woven together with art, the *Aeneid* lacks structure. Virgil has not the simplicity of Homer nor has he the wonderful singleness of heart of Dante and Milton. Of course the schoolboy does not think of such critical distinctions as these; but the teacher has to know them.

Moreover Virgil is in most cases the first Latin poet with whom the student in our schools becomes acquainted. That teachers of the

classics may bring their scholars into contact with authors of the great excellence of Caesar, Cicero, and Virgil is something on which they may well congratulate themselves; but it means endless work. In Virgil there are the complications of syntax and vocabulary and versification. Virgil's syntax is on the whole easily understood. The free use of cases and the free use of the complementary or object infinitive are the main departures from the syntax of Caesar or of Cicero. Virgil's vocabulary may fairly be termed hard. It has been estimated that in the first book of the *Aeneid* 450 words occur which the student has not seen before and as many more words which he has seen but once or twice. Many of these belong distinctly to poetic diction. Latin versification brings its own problems as well. However simple the prosody of Virgil may be on paper, it is not often that a high-school boy can read a page of the *Aeneid* gracefully.

The *opus maximum* is of course how to translate Virgil. On the surface the task here is no harder than in Caesar or Cicero. Students say that they have no great difficulty in "getting out" their Virgil. But since the *Aeneid* is a poem and a great poem, it ought never to be treated lightly; and the translation should always be the best that the student can present. The difficulties here are manifold. Often the order of the words is hard to follow, harder to present in English dress. There are Virgilian idioms impossible to translate.¹ For example, it requires genius to put into our language the most beautiful single line in the poem

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

Here we have no right to demand the impossible of our students. Respect for Virgil should induce us to furnish the translation of the great lines of the poem. We should remember that as things are, no other poet suffers "more deaths in schoolboy land than he."

These are only a few of the difficulties which every teacher of Virgil has to face. For most of these difficulties there are obvious remedies and compensating rewards. Latin is hard, and Virgil is hard, and it is one of the glories of our cause that the classics never have stood, and do not stand today, for intellectual coddling. On the other hand we should resist those who favor the study of Latin and Greek simply because they discipline the mind. To be sure, the honest translation

¹ Cf. the words of Dryden in his "Dedication" of the *Aeneid*.

of a poet like Virgil does challenge all the powers of the mind. It is a most rigorous exercise in English and in Latin. It is, however, much more than this. It is an effort to express in our own noble tongue a great poem and to understand that poem the better through the process. Where the classes are small it is advisable to require written translations. In all cases, the translation should be clear and simple and idiomatic. But the wise teacher will not hesitate now and then to do the translation of certain passages himself, or to read the version of some great translator. We have no right to ask the impossible—particularly from young minds. Nothing is so discouraging as to ask a person of ordinary ability to do something which requires genius. Now and again it will do no harm to spend the full hour on the translation of a passage say of half a dozen lines and to point out how difficult professional translators such as Dryden and Cranch have found it to translate these lines well. It is often salutary to make a school-boy feel that sometimes he shares his difficulties with mature scholars and poets.

In general it is a good thing to have the Latin text read aloud. But the following rule should not be forgotten: "Never ask a person to read a passage in a foreign idiom aloud until it is perfectly clear to him." Perfect intelligence should precede every effort to interpret the text orally. The same caution holds good of scansion. Of course any passage is good enough to use to apply the rule of long and short syllables. But after the rudiments have been learned, practice should be on well-known passages. The metrical reading of Virgil is in any case difficult enough. But perhaps, as it is better to have seen *Hamlet* poorly acted than never to have seen *Hamlet* at all, so it may be better to have scanned Virgil aloud ever so poorly rather than to leave school with the impression that Virgil means only six books of printed lines. For, as Mr. Theodore Williams remarked at the meeting of the New England Classical Association at Northampton last April—whether the lines of Virgil be read quantitatively or accentually, whether they be pronounced with the accuracy of a scholar or the hurry of a schoolboy, whether they be read with full continental richness of vowel sound or in our good New England twang, there yet lingers about them something goodly and sonorous.

So much for the lesser details: and now for the heart of the matter. What are we going to do with Virgil in our schools? How are we to interpret him? The problem concerns both school and college; it is of moment to all interested in the classical cause. We need have no fear for the future of Virgil or of the classics. We know that our cause is not a lost cause, nor a losing cause, but a winning cause; because the excellence of the classics must always appeal to the best instincts and the best intelligence of the race. In 3500 A. D. it is inconceivable that the best schoolboy in our best schools, no matter what else he may be studying, shall not be studying Virgil. Meantime, it is our task to teach him as well as he can be taught. For we must regard Virgil as the culminating point in our school work. In presenting the Latin cause today Virgil must be taught more and more effectively in our schools for the sake of the many who pursue their study of him no farther either in college or in their own reading. In our schools we ought to pay the same attention to Virgil as do the teachers of English to Shakespeare; and our best classical scholars should at the end of their high-school days look forward to continuing their study of Virgil in college. It is often in their study of Virgil that students have their interest in Latin either awakened or killed. And as Virgil usually is the last Latin author read in school, the impression is the more permanent. That to the high-school boy or girl Cicero is more real than Virgil is shown in a very subtle way by those delightful essays, "Virgil in Maine" and "Cicero in Maine." The scholars in that little schoolhouse had the relentless practical knowledge of youth; they held the seamanship of Aeneas very cheap; they wondered that Dido had not considered the possibility of her lover's being wafted back to her again by contrary winds before she toasted herself on the funeral pyre. But they were stirred by the life and speeches of Cicero. If it was distasteful to them "to strew the Virgilian path with joy and exclamation points," it was good to applaud "How long, O Catiline!"

There seems to me to be one way of making the study of Virgil even more effective than it is today; and that is to study the poem as we have it as a whole, and not to limit ourselves mechanically to the first six books. I believe that it would be a feasible plan to have a textbook which should include all twelve books and to read such

selections from all twelve as the teacher of experience would pick out. In the first six books there are 4,755 lines. If selections covering no more lines than these in amount should be read from all twelve books, if the story of the rest should be given by reading the translation of the lines not covered in the class, the student would gain as much knowledge of Latin—for there would be the same drill in constructions and grammar—more knowledge of Virgil, and greater appreciation for Latin poetry. Such a scheme does not mean increased work for the pupil, although it does imply wider reading for the teacher. The plan has the additional advantage of being directly in line with the recommendations of numerous classical associations of the country for uniformity in college entrance requirements whereby the schools shall choose the major part of the reading to be done by their students. To assist the teachers in making their selections it might be practicable to appoint a committee from this association composed of representatives from our schools and colleges to submit to this association for approval a list of passages from Virgil which will best represent the various books of the *Aeneid*. Doubtless it may not be easy to carry these suggestions into operation. Doubtless many objections will occur to each one of you. But it seems very clear that with the text of the twelve books at hand, with a good translation, such as that of Mr. Theodore Williams, teacher and poet, at the disposal of the teacher, and with a list of the best passages in the *Aeneid* to study, a year's course in Virgil could be given in our schools which would show that Maine is not behind Massachusetts or any other state in efficiency of its Latin teaching.

But whether or no the plan for the study of Virgil in our schools as here outlined seems to you utopian, there can be not the slightest question but that we should do well not to omit all consideration of the last six books from our high-school courses. Our students should know that books vii–xii exist. They should become acquainted with the names at least of the early heroes of

that low Italy,
On whose account the maid Camilla died,
Euryalus, Turnus, Nisus, of their wounds.

They should know that here Aeneas is no longer Odysseus the wanderer but Achilles the warrior. Here are things that appeal

instinctively to the boy and to the girl and make the understanding of Virgil's characters easier. Here there is fighting and action enough and to spare. Here are some of the finest portraits in the poem—the shadowy Lavinia, the virgin warrior Camilla, the splendid barbarian Mezentius, the nobly defeated Turnus. Here are such varied incidents as the friendship of Nisus and Euryalus, the final combat between Aeneas and Turnus, the burial of Pallas, the youth who lay on his rustic bier “as a flower plucked by a virgin—the gentle violet or the yielding hyacinth.” With such scenes to witness and such rich characters to know, it is a crying shame that Aeneas is so often left stranded at the Ivory Gate.

Such a study might stimulate the better students to the praiseworthy ambition of continuing their Latin and their Virgil in college; and to such as do not enter college, a class of students even more important, it would present Virgil in a full light. It is difficult of course to bring out for the beginner the many subtle beauties of the classics; and such a study should be pursued when the student is mature enough to benefit from it, either in college or in his own reading. But however that may be and however Virgil may be taught, he has certain qualities which no teacher has a right to overlook, since classical poetry is to continue to play its part in the education of America. Whether the *Aeneid* be taught in our schools, as some day it will be taught, in its entirety, or whether it be taught piecemeal, it is a noble and refreshing thing to remember that its poet, whom we do well to teach, never wrote an impure line; that he was a strong and manly poet; that he loved Rome with an ardent and single-hearted patriotism. And whoever or wherever the teacher may be who leaves impressed upon the minds of his class that Virgil in his poetry and in his patriotism stood for excellence, he may have done far more than he realizes to have trained his boys and girls not only in Latin but in those qualities which make for the best American citizenship.